FOR THE LOVE OF GOD
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Psalm 146
Mark 12:28-34

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength . . . . You shall love your neighbor as yourself."
Mark 12:30, 31

At the meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) last summer, we did a lot of what Presbyterians seem to do best these days — argue and fight, call one another names, threaten to quit.

Afterward I received a message from a friend I had seen there. The General Assembly is at least in part a big family reunion: an opportunity to reconnect with friends you haven't seen for two years.

One of the good friends I met and chatted with is Bill Forbes, the Reverend William Forbes, a Presbyterian minister who has served several congregations as pastor with great distinction. Bill has also served our national church in a variety of important positions. He's an outgoing, energetic man — who serves and lives with great joy. In his perennial khaki suit, regimental tie and tassel loafers he looks like an Eddie Bauer ad.

Bill was thinner, looking a little tired, I thought.

In the middle of the Assembly Bill wrote a message to his friends: "'Today is the first day of the rest of your life' . . . 'Life's a terminal condition' . . . 'Don't sweat the small stuff.' We are but one test result away from our lives being turned upside down. All of those phrases have passed from my lips with ease . . . . Last fall they took on new meaning when I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given a very sobering prognosis for the future. Seven months later, following rigorous chemotherapy, radiation, major surgery and additional follow-up treatment, those phrases have even greater meaning."

"The business we consider at our General Assemblies is important," Bill wrote. "The same can be said for any Presbytery or Session docket" — I would add, for that matter, all the activity and busyness the thousand and one meetings and conferences and sales conventions and business trips to which we give ourselves, day by day. Bill went on: "But what is really important is more basic. How have I related and cared for those with whom

I have come in contact today? Have I told my spouse how much I love and care for him or her? Have I told my children and grandchildren the same? Have I prayed for those in particular need today? Have I reflected on how incredible the gift of life really is? Have I given thanks for the multitude of blessings in my life?"

What this good minister is asking, I think, is: "Have you loved?" Have you learned, as his illness has taught him, that to love is the essence of our humanity, the very heart of who we are and who we were meant to be as men and women? What this good minister is now preaching in this most eloquent sermon in his life is that to love is to be alive.

Maybe it happened so long ago you can barely remember, but to love someone — a spouse, a child, a dear friend, a lover, a beloved, is to be drawn out of yourself. It is to be willing to reorganize your life around this amazing new reality, it is to want to be with the beloved as much as possible, to want to be near her or him, to travel long distances, to spend money extravagantly, to be kind and thoughtful, to do nice things, to care for deeply, in sickness and health. And, all that is not a burden: on the contrary it is to be wonderfully, uniquely, miraculously alive.

We ministers try to find words to say that to the brides and grooms we marry on Saturday afternoons, although most of them probably aren't hearing much at the moment. Nevertheless we try to find words to say to them and to the congregation they have invited to be present, that this new reality, this love they have discovered, has the potential at least to make each of them more and bigger and better and much more alive than either of them ever was alone.

It is the very heart of Christianity, love is: God's love for us, for the creation, for the world, for all people, for us. Our love for God and our love for our neighbors who were once eloquently defined as anyone who needs us. It is the heart of Christian faith.

A lawyer once asked Jesus: "Which commandment is the first of all?" He had overheard an argument: they were arguing, as religious people often do, over doctrine and marriage, a perennial hot topic, apparently . . . if a woman marries seven brothers, one after another, after each one dies, whose wife will she be in heaven? Sounds like the kind of thing Presbyterians could spend a couple of years arguing about. Incidentally, I always heard that story from a less theological and more immediate perspective. I always wondered why brother number four, say, after marriage to this woman had proven fatal to his three older brothers, didn't decline the honor.

The lawyer overheard the argument and posed a good question, a sincere inquiry —: the greatest commandment, the number one priority, the heart of the matter? Jesus quoted the Shema, from the Book of Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one: you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength." Every Jew knew, and knows, that. They memorized it, kept in their heart, wore it in a little pouch around their wrist or forehead, nailed it to the front door of the house, recited it, taught it to their children. God is one — Love God with heart, soul, mind and strength: with everything in you. And — Jesus added a second commandment. The man asked for one and got two. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." That's in the Bible, too; the book of Leviticus. So it's not new. What is unique is that Jesus puts them together: the love of God and love of neighbor in a way that makes one commandment. That is new. Walter Brueggemann says that Jesus invents a new moral benchmark here and a new word: "Godneighbor."

He certainly expands the horizons of religion, and the lawyer understands: to love God with all the heart and neighbor as self is much more important than all the religious rituals in the world, all the burnt offerings and sacrifices, all the hymns and prayers, and Bible studies and candles and processionals and ceremonies. The heart of the matter is love: love for God and love for neighbor.

Notice the holistic nature of religion as Jesus redefines it: "heart, soul, mind and strength." It is not about our minds alone, our intellects, the rational categories they create, the books they write. Jesus said we are, in fact, to love God with our minds, a commandment Christians have not always obeyed. But that is only one fourth of it. It's also a matter of heart and soul: of emotion and spirit: that place in us where we know beyond knowing, that place in us where our deepest passion lives, the place, Pascal said, where the heart has reasons that reason does not understand. That's part of religion, too, Jesus said, heart and soul. But it's still not all, "Love God with all your strength," he said: with your hands and arms and back and legs, with the physical you, whatever that is. Loving God is sensual, tactile, physical. You do it by walking all six miles of the Crop Walk, building the Habitat for Humanity house —digging, hammering, sawing — cooking the meal, washing the dishes. You do it staying with it, past weariness until the job is done; rocking the baby, changing the diaper, reading the story when you can barely keep your eyes open. You love God with all your strength when you care for your aging parent, brother, or sister: when you stay late to finish the job, the surgery, the case, the deal . . . when you go over it one more time to get it right. You love God with all your strength when you do what God has called you to do, what God has gifted you to do, with everything in you.

The first two words most babies learn to speak consistently are “no” and “mine.” You might say that a lot of us go through the rest of our lives saying these two words over and over. “No” and “Mine.” The Bible calls us to say “Yes” and “Yours,” or at least “Ours.” From the very beginning Biblical religion would call you out of yourself into something bigger, broader, more beautiful.

We sang one of the great hymns of the faith this morning, a setting of Psalm 146, by Isaac Watts and John Wesley. We read the Psalm as well — it is a quintessential Judeo-Christian affirmation:

> “I’ll praise my maker while I’ve breath;
> And when my voice is lost in death,
> Praise shall employ my nobler powers.
> My days of praise shall ne’er be past,
> While life and thought and being last . . .”

We are called out of ourselves to the love and praise of God which is, the faith knows, to be truly and completely alive. It is an idea, a definition of religion that is contrary to, and the opposite from, the organizing idea behind a lot of contemporary spirituality — which is unabashedly, unashamedly about you. It’s about me: my feelings, my adjustment, my success, my happiness, my relationships, my salvation. It’s about good advice on getting ahead, achieving my goal, or increasing my net worth and buying the house of my dreams. There is no little irony in the fact that some of the most popular forms of contemporary spirituality take the basic Biblical message of getting out of self in order to love and live for God and neighbor, and turn it around 180 degrees, refocusing everything back on the self.

The late William Sloane Coffin lived a full life. He cared passionately about justice and peace and our nation, wore his heart on his sleeve and often put his body on the line as well as an intelligence officer during World War II, a civil rights freedom rider, a Vietnam war protester, and an advocate for nuclear disarmament. He loved great music, good poetry, his family and above all, God. Along the way he said a lot of wise and witty things — books full of them. My favorite is this:

> “Socrates had it wrong: it is not the unexamined life but finally the uncommitted life that is not worth living. Descartes too was mistaken. ‘Cogito ergo sum’ — ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Nonsense! ‘Amo ergo sum’ — ‘I love therefore I am.’ Or as St. Paul wrote with unconscious eloquence: ‘Now abide faith, hope, love, these three; and the greatest of these is love.’” “I believe that,” Coffin added. “I believe it is better not to live than not to love” (*Credo*, p. 5).

Love, Coffin said, is the final measurement of our stature: “the more we love, the bigger we are.” And then, referring to the current fashionable self-focus of modern spirituality: “There is no smaller package in all the world than that of a man all wrapped up in himself” (p. 24).

“Hear, O Israel,” the Bible says: “Listen —everyone — You shall love.” “Pay attention,” Jesus said, “you shall love God with everything in you and your neighbor as yourself.

At the heart of Christian faith is an imperative and a promise. It is both spiritual and physical at the same time. It is a command, actually, to love God with everything in us — and to love our neighbors, a singular, single imperative to love. And the promise, the reward is fully human, passionately human life.

Jürgen Moltmann, a German theologian, in a scholarly book — *The Passion for Life* —said: “Human life is alive to the extent that it is loved. The more passionately we love life, the more intensely we experience the joy of life . . . Where Jesus is, there is life. There is abundant life, vigorous life, loved life, eternal life” (*The Passion for Life*, p. 25, 19).

We need one another to carry this off. I can love God by watching the sun rise over the lake and saying “thank you,” or the golden leaves of autumn falling, or the intricacy of an iris in full bloom next spring. I can love God when I hold a child in my arms, or hear a Bach prelude. But I need some help to love God fully. I need some other voices to join, to sing, “I’ll praise my maker while I’ve breath,” or say “I believe in God the Father Almighty,” on the day I’m having a little trouble believing, or pray “for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever” on the day I can’t see anything of God’s Kingdom out there.

I can love my neighbor, a bit at least, by smiling patiently at the unpleasant grouch who makes life miserable for the rest of us by ignoring the condo rules, by giving a dollar to the *Streetwise* salesman or the man on the corner every day with his dog and the cup, and I can serve a hot meal to the homeless every now and then. But, I confess, I need some help to love God fully and my neighbor with any kind of consistency, and faithfulness and generosity. And so that’s what I’m doing when I drop a pledge card into the plate this morning. I’m joining a company of people I need to help me love God and neighbor: people who will help me sing and praise God, and who will help me to love neighbor in all the many ways the church reaches out in love: to children in the Day Care and Tutoring Programs, in Church School and Youth Trips: to hungry and homeless neighbors, to neighbors who are anxious and afraid and lonely. I need help in fulfilling Jesus’ two great commandments. I need church.

Frederick Buechner, in his latest book, reminds us that God's people first heard the Shema — "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one: and you shall love the Lord your God . . ." in the wilderness where they were wandering lost, afraid, hungry, dispirited, not knowing what was to become of them, with no resources left, afraid they were going to die — no food, water — nothing left except whatever they had in their hearts. And so it came as a promise as well as a commandment. Love and you will live.

Buechner sat in a unique wilderness, beside the bedside of a daughter seriously ill with anorexia. Nothing he said or did made any difference. "I had passed beyond grief, beyond terror, all but beyond hope, and it was there, in that wilderness that for the first time in my life I caught sight of what it must be like to love God truly. It was only a glimpse, but it was like stumbling on fresh water in the desert . . . I loved God because there was nothing else left . . . I loved God because I could not help myself" (*Secrets in the Dark*, p. 102, 3)

You shall love God with everything in you. You shall love your neighbor.

Out of his own wilderness Bill Forbes wrote and spoke deeply to me, and all his friends, all of us:

> "It is so easy to get caught up in matters that seem so important but in the grand scheme of God's plan for the world and our lives, aren't really that important." "Reach out to one another," Bill wrote. "Pray for one another and let people know you are praying for them. Pray for our church. Smile and laugh more, frown less. Love one another."

"Which commandment is the first of all?" Jesus was asked. It is the right question. And the answer is: "You shall love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength . . ." and — "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Amen